

New COVID-19 restrictions coming on Thursday

Starting on Dec. 17, indoor gatherings are permitted to immediate household members only

By **Kelly Skjerven** - December 14, 2020



(Screen Capture) Premier Scott Moe and Chief Medical Health Officer Dr. Saqib Shahab speak to reporters during a recent press conference.

The provincial government announced several new COVID-19 restrictions on Monday. The restrictions will be implemented in phases over the next two weeks.

Effective Dec. 17, indoor gatherings will be limited to immediate household members only. Single-member households are allowed to meet with one consistent household as long as there's less than five people. This order doesn't apply to co-parenting arrangements and caregiver and support services in the home.

Outdoor gatherings can occur with up to 10 people as long as physical distancing is maintained between households.

On Saturday, casino and bingo halls must close and personal care services will operate at 50 per cent capacity. Personal care services include hair salons/barbers, esthetics, massage therapy, and acupuncture. A full list of personal care services is available on the government's [website](#). Event venues, conference facilities, arenas, arts venues, museums, movie and live theatres and banquet facilities can still have up to 30 people at live events. Guests must be seated throughout the event and "food and drink are not permitted unless explicitly stated in the order."

Weddings, funeral ceremonies and places of worship are still allowed 30 people only.

Effective Christmas Day, retail services will have to reduce their capacity up to 50 per cent. Large retail locations, which are defined as retailers larger than 20,000 sq ft., must limit their capacity to 25 per cent capacity.

The government recently reactivated the Saskatchewan small business emergency payments program. The program provides payments of up to \$5,000 for small to medium sized businesses that are required to shut own or significant reduce operations due public health orders in place.

Premier Scott Moe said he understands if Monday's announcement may impact additional small businesses and said if required and if they qualify, businesses can now access those emergency payments.

Moe said the new measures are aimed at slowing down transmission rates. He said there are positive indicators that current measures are having an impact but there is still work to do.

"This needs to be a much quieter Christmas," Moe added that unnecessary travel should be avoided and people should work from home if they can.

"As we approach the Christmas season and the end of the calendar year, 2020, and with the promise of a vaccine on the horizon, I'm asking everyone, we have a few more miles to travel and we need to see this through together," Moe said.

The premier added that we need to stabilize our cases numbers to protect the health care system and vulnerable communities.

All public health measures will stay in effect until Jan. 15. At that time the Chief Medical Health Officer will review them.

On Monday, Dr. Saqib Shahab said that COVID-19 cases aren't going up as earlier models predicted, but they also aren't going down as quickly as he would like so he hopes further measures will help.

Shahab added that the province is still seeing significant transmission in the household setting and with coworkers who don't practice physical distancing. The province hasn't recently seen large outbreaks or superspreader events, thanks to measures currently in place, he said.

"I think we really need to focus on where the transmission is happening, which is mostly in those household settings or when people are meeting and greeting each other. Things that are natural for us all the time and especially over the holidays. But at this time, unfortunately they are leading to our ongoing transmission," Shahab said.

Shahab also addressed the "tremendous tragedy" happening in long term care facilities.

"It's devastating for obviously residents who are unwell (and) who passed away. It is devastating for the families," he said.

Shahab re-iterated that the province needs to go down to less than 10 cases per 100,000 population. Currently, Saskatchewan has 21.7 cases per 100,000 population.

Both Moe and Shahab also addressed the anti-masker rally that took place this weekend in Regina, where an individual made racist comments about Shahab.

Moe said that the “inconveniences” that the government is asking the public to follow are minor compared to the “huge inconveniences” faced by families with immunocompromised members, and ultimately families who have lost a loved one to COVID-19.

“(Protesters) are flagrantly encouraging others to not follow public health advice, which is against the law and they quite simply shouldn’t do it,” Moe said.

Moe called the comments about Shahab made by an individual at this weekend’s rally, “foolish”, “racist” and “nothing short of idiotic.”

“I think it’s been explained as (those comments) should be allowed due to the fact that we have freedom of speech in this country, and that’s correct, and we do have freedom of speech. Then we also have the freedom for people like myself to describe those comments as racist,” Moe added.

Moe continued to list Shahab’s achievements including graduating at the very top of his class at the University of Punjab in Pakistan, and receiving his masters in public health from John Hopkins University. The premier said Saskatchewan is very fortunate to have him here.

“I’m actually very embarrassed that anyone from this province would make such disgusting comments. I find it sickening and I know many other people in the province do,” Moe added.

The premier also encouraged people to reach out and thank Shahab over social media.

Shahab said he was grateful for the premier and the leader of opposition for condemning the comments, and for people who reached out to him on social media.

He also added that he has his own privileges.

“I’m a male physician, well-paid with a good job and I’m shielded from the harm that the comments made.”

Shahab added that there many people in the province and world who don’t have these privileges and protections.

“I think this gives us pause to think about own prejudices, and all of us have them, I have them, and to be thoughtful about how what we say, how it impacts others,” Shahab said.

Mayor Dionne applauds Dr. Shahab

Mayor Greg Dionne also weighed in on the racist comments directed at Shahab. Dionne made his remarks during the mayor and councillors forum at Monday’s city council meeting.

"I'm just shocked that we still have a few rednecks left in Saskatchewan that will do that. That's a blemish on our community. He's working hard to keep us safe, our children safe, and he's working hard to get us back to a normal life."

Dionne also said the City plans to send a letter of support to Shahab.

He also plans to write a letter to frontline workers "congratulating them on the year that they've had under all these stresses and thanking them." He also plans to write a letter to the police department who he says "is well involved now with COVID." He said police officers are high risk because they've had to interact with people who have COVID-19.

Dionne also said people won't like some of the new guidelines coming into place but he encourages them to follow them.

"It's for you that the government is bringing these rules in. For everyone that's listening, if you want organized sports and some regular life to return normally in the New Year, abide by the rules, because if we do not flatten the curve, we will not have organized sports in the New Year."

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